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May 23, 2003

Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
Office of the Secretary  
445 12<sup>th</sup> Street, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20554

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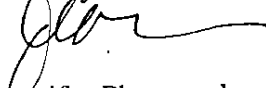
Federal Communications Commission  
Office of the Secretary

Re: MB Docket No. 02-277; MM Docket Nos. 01-235, 01-317, 00-244

Dear Ms. Dortch:

Please place this document from Youth Media Council, entitled "Is KMEL the People's Station" on the official record for the proceeding of MB Docket 02-277.

Thank you,

  
Jennifer Phurrough

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List A B C D E

# IS KMEL THE PEOPLE'S STATION?



## A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT OF 106.1 KMEL

Fall 2002

A community survey authored by the  
Youth Media Council

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY 106.1 KMEL?

*"When stuff goes down in our communities, young folks are listening to KMEL, not watching the news. If it doesn't get air on KMEL, we don't know it's happening."*

—Mindzeye Member

106.1 KMEL is the primary radio station for Bay Area youth and people of color, listened to by more than 600,000 people. Though it calls itself the "People's Station," a 2002 community assessment of KMEL content led by youth organizers, community groups and local artists found otherwise. While KMEL claims to provide access, accountability, and voice to Bay Area communities, the assessment shows:

- KMEL content routinely excludes the voices of youth organizers and local artists,
- KMEL neglects discussion of policy debates affecting youth and people of color,
- KMEL focuses disproportionately on crime and violence, and
- KMEL has no clear avenues for listeners to hold the station accountable.

This new report offers specific recommendations for KMEL station managers and on-air hosts, and presents a framework for KMEL to build strong relationships with youth, community organizers and local artists to increase media access and accountability. Pursuing these recommendations would give Bay Area youth of color the opportunity to speak for themselves about issues that impact their communities and lives, and would allow KMEL to live up to its "People's Station" claim.

The National Association of Broadcasters has recognized KMEL for outstanding community service, stating that, "KMEL has invested more time, money, and manpower towards Bay Area communities by teaming up with local organizations throughout the cities of SF and Oakland." This partnership may have been achieved with large, moneyed non-profits like the Omega Boys Club, but smaller grassroots non-profits that use organizing as their primary social change strategy have been excluded from the station's "teaming up." Strong relationships between organizers, local artists and KMEL are central to building strong communities and promoting social justice for youth and their families.

We hope this report will be used as a tool to promote a partnership between KMEL and local youth artists and organizations. We hope to increase access for youth and youth organizers, improve accountability mechanisms, open a more balanced and thorough debate on youth policy issues on the Sunday talk show "Street Soldiers," and increase KMEL's acknowledgement of the vibrant social justice work being led by youth and young artists in the Bay.

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## BACKGROUND

**A**ccording to a 2001 study of local news, youth are “more likely to be depicted in the context of crime and violence than through issues such as health, education, family and community life”<sup>1</sup> – leading the public to support policy solutions that endanger youth and their communities. This assessment will demonstrate that content on entertainment station 106.1 KMEL is consistent with this trend.

Despite dramatic decreases in juvenile crime, leading to the lowest rate of juvenile crime and victimization in 25 years, 80 percent of respondents to a 1998 Los Angeles poll said the media's coverage of violent crime had increased their personal fear of being a victim<sup>2</sup>. From 1990-1998, the national crime rate dropped by 20 percent, but news coverage of crime increased by 83 percent<sup>3</sup>. In this context, the yet-unformed Youth Media Council with We Interrupt This Message began challenging biased media debates about youth and youth policy by organizing youth and community organizations to analyze newspaper coverage. A team of homeless youth examined the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1997, and in 2000 a team of young researchers performed a content analysis of seven newspaper outlets across the state of California. A year later, we analyzed content of KTVU Channel 2's "10 O'Clock News" show. In all three studies we found similar results:

- Messages promoting punishment policy controlled the debate
- Most stories focused on crime and violence
- Police, prosecutors, and politicians were quoted at more than twice the rate of youth, and more than three times the rate of youth of color
- Youth were portrayed behind gates and bars, in handcuffs, or in courtrooms
- Solutions and root causes to problems raised in coverage were invisible, youth poverty was rarely mentioned in conjunction with youth crime, even though it has been proven repeatedly that poverty is the primary indicator for youth crime.



## THE GOALS OF THE CAMPAIGN TO BUILD A PEOPLE'S STATION

As local youth organizers and artists, we understand radio to be a necessary tool for improving the conditions in our communities, holding corporations and policy-makers responsible for those conditions, and increasing access to information and analysis for young people of color and other marginalized communities. Therefore, the "Build a People's Station" Campaign hopes to:

- Build strong relationships between 106.1 KMEI and social justice youth organizations in the Bay Area
- Increase the access of youth, youth organizers, and local artists to 106.1 KMEI

- Amplify the civic voice of youth and broaden the youth policy debate on 106.1 KMEL's talk show "Street Soldiers"
- Increase the accountability of 106.1 KMEL to its audience, which is overwhelmingly made up of young people of color

We also hope this assessment will encourage hosts and announcers at 106.1 KMEI to join the hundreds of Bay Area youth organizations in increasing access and accountability. We need KMEI to give our communities better access to information and analysis, and to allow marginalized youth, youth organizers, and artists to speak, sing, and rap for ourselves about issues and policies that impact us most.

## BACKGROUND CONT.

Repeatedly, the Youth Media Council has found that when outlets cover youth or youth policy their content criminalizes and silences youth – particularly youth of color – and creates a climate supportive of ineffective, unfair, unbalanced, and dangerous public policies.

We hope this unique report will serve as a springboard for young people to continue raising their voices and to reclaim the media as a tool for social change.

Many studies have focused on the impact news coverage has on public opinion and policy, while others have looked at the way entertainment television and movies breed a popular culture thick with racial stereotypes and misinformation. But initial online searches found no studies focused on the role and responsibility of entertainment radio in urban communities. We, specifically, looked for studies that had been conducted by members of the communities most impacted by biased or misleading content, and found nothing.

We hope this unique report will serve as a springboard for young people to continue raising their voices and to reclaim the media as a tool for social change.

### METHODS

Last year, following the firing of popular KMEL host Davey D, a group of concerned community members met with KMEL to discuss its coverage of community issues, the war on terrorism, and the exclusion of local artists and organizers from airtime. A year later, youth from local community organizations launched a media-accountability campaign focusing on KMEL and conducted a community-based assessment of one month of content.

#### Our primary research questions were:

- Whose voices are heard and whose are excluded?
- What are the primary themes raised in content?
- Who is held responsible for problems raised in content?
- Are policies, root causes, or solutions mentioned in content?

Ten youth and young adult researchers listened to 24 drive-time broadcasts (6am-10am and 3pm-6pm), beginning September 10 and ending September 30, 2002, and four broadcasts of KMEL's nationally-syndicated weekly talk show, "Street Soldiers," beginning September 15 and ending October 6, 2002.

Because we were most interested in the messages and themes promoted by KMEL's spokespeople, we did not directly monitor the content of KMEL's music, except to identify whether local artists are being played on the station.

The first survey of its kind, we hope this community assessment of local entertainment radio will advance a discussion among KMEL's listeners, improve relations between local artists, social justice advocates and KMEL, and provide a model for community groups nationwide to monitor the media and organize for real media justice and democracy.

## CONTROL THE AIRWAVES, STRENGTHEN A MOVEMENT

Radio is the medium that has been most affected by government deregulation. Before 1996 a company could only own 28 stations in the entire country<sup>4</sup>. Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Clear Channel Communications, KMEL's owning corporation and the world's largest entertainment promoter, has purchased more than 1200 stations.

Radio, more than any other form of media, has the potential to be a grassroots tool for information and action. Radios are inexpensive to own, and you can listen no matter what you are doing. In the most impoverished parts of the United States, where literacy and cost make newspapers inaccessible, radio reaches into people's homes and communities.

Though radio is the medium most affected by deregulation, it provides important openings for audience participation. The call-in format of radio programs offers opportunities for the public to respond immediately to concerns with content and interact with hosts in a way that local television and newspapers do not. Unlike other media formats, urban entertainment stations like KMEL often have Street Teams that are visible in local communities. And because the public still technically owns the airwaves and it is relatively inexpensive to produce radio content, there are increased opportunities for communities to participate in improving and developing broadcast content.

It is because of the potential radio offers the youth movement that youth organizations must take up the challenge of confronting broadcast outlets that claim to provide youth voice and access, but instead, often silence and criminalize poor and working class communities of color.

*Youth organizations must take up the challenge of confronting broadcast outlets that claim to provide youth voice and access, but instead, often silence and criminalize poor and working class communities of color.*

### CLEAR CHANNEL & CORPORATE CONTROL OF OUR COMMUNITIES

KMEL is one of ten radio stations in the Bay Area owned by the multi-billion dollar corporation Clear Channel. Based in San Antonio, Texas, Clear Channel also owns the majority of concert venues and billboards in the Bay Area, as well as the overwhelming majority of radio stations, concert venues, and billboards across the United States.

In 2001, Clear Channel grossed over \$8 billion. Clear Channel's corporate model has resulted in homogenized content, downsized station staff, decreased access for local artists and social justice organizers, and movement further and further away from the local communities stations claim to represent.

This has had devastating effects on the diversity of information and music at Clear Channel stations. In a drive to maximize profits, the company has eliminated most local news and public affairs programs from their stations. In many cases, meaningful local programming was replaced with syndicated shows, including a stable of "Shock Jocks" who are increasingly under fire for racist and sexist content<sup>5</sup>.

To make problems worse, Clear Channel and other media mega-corporations have done away with avenues for listeners to hold local stations accountable. As a result, at KMEL in the Bay Area and in cities across the country, the public interest and community demands for meaningful local programming is taking a back seat to corporate interests.

"Sensationalized crime coverage... lays the groundwork for grotesquely punitive criminal justice measures"

—Barbara Ehrenreich, journalist

## THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA BIAS AT 106.1 KMEL

More than 50 percent of KMEL's listeners are people of color. Though crime, violence, education, and poverty were all discussed on KMEL during the period of this assessment, racism was never mentioned as a factor in any of these conditions. This has a devastating impact on local policy fights impacting communities of color.

This Fall, Oakland residents challenged Measure FF, Mayor Jerry Brown's ballot initiative to hire 100 new police as a solution to the recent rise in homicides. Citizen organizers and criminal justice groups warned that the costly measure was ineffective, unbalanced, unfair, and dangerous to youth and civic peace.

While KMEL's "Street Soldiers" devoted the majority of monitored broadcasts to recent homicides in Oakland, its hosts overwhelmingly supported increased policing and punishment as a solution to social and economic problems. They never mentioned Measure FF by name, and never once mentioned the growing number of community members opposed to Measure FF.

### WHAT IS MEDIA BIAS AND ACCOUNTABILITY?

News and entertainment media shape our perceptions and influence the policy choices of decision-makers on a local, national, and international level. Media outlets are centers of information. Whether they are television news or local hip-hop and R&B stations, all media outlets have a responsibility to deliver accurate, balanced, thorough, and relevant information to their audience.

#### Media Bias

The Youth Media Council defines media bias as unbalanced, inaccurate, and unfair portrayals of a person, community, or issue.

Media outlets like 106.1 KMEL are guilty of media bias when they focus on problems instead of causes and solutions, and blame the most vulnerable members of our society instead of holding institutions and decision-makers accountable for policies and conditions they create in our communities. Clearly, outlets that tell youth stories from only one perspective and don't back up their stories with real statistics or social context, promote unbalanced, unfair, and dangerous youth policy.

#### Media Accountability

Media accountability for youth occurs when young people build enough power and relationships with local and national media outlets to influence content, production, and ownership.

The goals of media accountability for youth organizers are to:

- Shift the balance of power between outlets and youth
- Amplify the public voice of those youth most marginalized by current media policy and content
- Expand the increasingly narrowed debate on youth policy
- Shift that debate from personal responsibility to institutional accountability
- Increase youth access to journalists, hosts, announcers, and all those whose voices and choices shape content
- Work with outlets to design and implement internal policies that work to hold the outlet accountable for their content decisions



# WHAT WE FOUND

## **Youth Organizers and Artists Locked Out**

We found that representatives from the hundreds of local, grassroots youth organizations in the Bay Area using organizing or political education to address social problems were not heard on KMEL *at all*. As well, the Bay Area's strong community of popular local artists was virtually unheard. Although KMEL claims to invest in our communities, this community assessment revealed that the voices of young people working on local organizing campaigns and emerging local artists are still waiting to be heard on the "People's Station."

## **Lack of Access & Accountability**

After listening to KMEL's content and researching KMEL's policies, we found that KMEL currently has no viable methods of achieving meaningful listener feedback. KMEL only encourages audience participation through on-air contests and games. While there is an informal advisory board, its role in increasing KMEL's accountability to youth is unclear at best. Stacy Cunningham – who replaced Davey D, the former Community Affairs Director and progressive host – is now working under the title of Promotions Director, leaving the job of building relationships with community organizations unfilled. During the period of this community assessment, no Public Service Announcements from any organization working on local organizing issues were heard. In fact, KMEL ignored a PSA sent by youth organizations working against Oakland Measure FF, and never returned several phone calls offering youth perspectives on Measure FF for "Street Soldiers."

## **Focus on Crime and War, Not Social Change or Peace**

Crime and violence were the primary themes found in content. In one month of radio programming during KMEL drive times and Sunday evening talk shows, KMEL did not mention anti-war activities even once in announcements or commentary. Hosts did, however, overwhelmingly discuss crime, drugs, and violence.

## **Individuals Are Blamed, Policy and Root Causes Ignored**

After listening to four segments of the Sunday night KMEL talk show "Street Soldiers," community members found that although Bay Area crime and violence were the primary subjects of discussion in the month prior to the November 5 election, not one policy related to crime and violence was mentioned. Solutions to problems raised in content were limited to individuals making better choices, getting "new game plans," and changing personal behavior. Root causes were completely ignored.

## **SPOTLIGHT ON STREET SOLDIERS STORIES**

"Street Soldier's" hosts chose to focus the discussion on individual incidents of crime and violence pulled from news coverage, specifically the increased homicide rate in Oakland. Other headlines included the story of a young mother witnessed beating her child, a grandmother in Vallejo accused of selling drugs from her home, and a man that was beaten and murdered by a group of youth. By capturing these sensational stories from news coverage without simultaneously discussing how policies create social and economic conditions, looking at alternative policy solutions, or mentioning accurate statistics about the declining rate of juvenile crime and the relationship of crime to poverty and access to education, "Street Soldiers" echoed the criminalizing content of many mainstream, corporate-sponsored news stations.

Although we clearly have work to do, the Youth Media Council congratulates "Street Soldiers" on tackling tough issues and hopes to work together to transform the show into one that promotes youth voices, identifies root causes, and examines institutional solutions.

**STORY ONE:** For example, on one segment (10/6/02) hosts described the beating of a man by seven youth, one of whom was 10 years old. Rather than accurately informing the listening audience that juvenile crime has been declining for 25 years, that rates of violent crime in the Bay Area are not on the rise, or that incidents of young children committing violent crimes are rare, the hosts focused instead on whether the behavior of this child was "normal," and whether the child or his parents were to blame. The only question raised during this segment was whether kids are out of control – a frame used consistently by the media to promote fear of youth, particularly youth of color among adults.<sup>6</sup>

**STORY TWO:** Other segments included a similar focus on personal responsibility. Although "Street Soldiers" claims to be "revolutionary radio," in all four segments we found that hosts avoided any discussion of corporate or governmental accountability for conditions in our communities – and even steered callers away from mentioning the need for government programs, more jobs, or better schools. Instead, they blamed conditions on bad personal choices and "bad coaches (parents)" (9/29/02). They described poor communities as "losing the game because they can't see clearly," and suggested repeatedly that the only solution was to find a new game plan (9/15/02) and change individual behavior.

**STORY THREE:** In another segment (9/22/02), the hosts focused on the story of a grandmother accused of selling drugs out of her home in Vallejo. The hosts were not only inaccurate (the grandmother was accused of having drugs sold from her home, not of selling them herself), their headline for that story was, "Drug Dealing Grandmother in Vallejo," and their solution was to back a policy of taking away the homes of elderly, often African American, people as a solution to the proliferation of drugs in poor communities. The hosts also suggested that the grandmother move, kick her children out, or do her time. This neglect of the root causes of drugs and crime in poor communities of color, and the over-simplification of punishment-oriented policy echoes the script of Right-Wing personalities such as Rush Limbaugh or Bill O'Reilly, who focus only on individual blame and consistently misrepresent or ignore the facts.

**STORY FOUR:** When a caller said on one segment (9/22/02), "You have to look at every aspect of a person's life... let's get to the bottom of the whole thing, let's look at the root," the hosts responded that, "We cannot permit ourselves to excuse anyone in a life of crime. The bottom of the whole thing is individuals and personal choices and personal responsibility and that is something we have been lazy about when it comes to our people. What's happening is our people are colluding in their own destruction."

While KMEL blames individuals and ignores poverty as a cause of crime and other social conditions, their parent company, Clear Channel, simultaneously locks Bay Area and political artists out of economic opportunity.

As fewer corporations own a greater number of outlets, multi-billion dollar companies like Clear Channel maximize profits by decreasing staff, variety, and accountability at local stations like KMEL.

The result: local artists are sentenced to limited visibility and the hip hop generation is denied the opportunity to claim local beats that belong to their streets.

The record labels provide the pay off. "Most listeners don't know it, but virtually every song they hear on FM commercial radio has been paid for – indirectly – by five major record labels. The labels pay millions of dollars each year to the independent radio promoters, universally referred to as 'indies,' who in turn pass along money to radio stations whenever they add new songs to their playlists."<sup>7</sup>

Wendy Day, founder of the Rap Coalition explains, "It corrupts the art form. Because instead of radio playing what people want to hear, they're playing music that's backed by the deepest pockets."

"As a result many new and independent artists, as well as many established artists, are denied valuable radio air play," says a national coalition of artists in their statement to the FCC. "Whatever form 'pay-to-play' takes, these 'promotion' costs are often shared by the artists and adversely impact the ability of recording artists to succeed financially."<sup>8</sup>

According to the artists involved in this report, the payola phenomenon leads to a cycle of continued economic disenfranchisement for popular local artists who just want to bring the music heard on stations like KMEL back home.

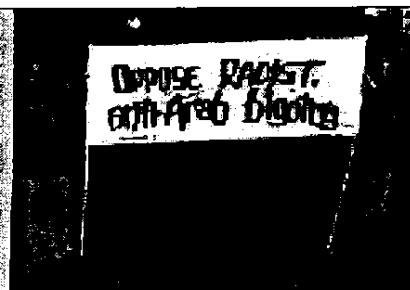
## **PASS THE MIC: HOW LOCAL ARTISTS ARE LOCKED OUT OF COMMERCIAL RADIO**

*...The payola phenomenon leads to a cycle of continued economic disenfranchisement for popular local artists who just want to bring the music heard on stations like KMEL back home.*

### **RADIO WARS**

The anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was included in the period of this community assessment. At the marker of this one-year anniversary, we heard new recruitment advertisements for INS inspectors, as well as recruitment ads for other branches of military. KMEL chose to honor the dead in New York, D.C., Pennsylvania and Afghanistan through celebrity spots responding to the question, "Where were you when the towers were hit?" KMEL announcers did not mention the impending war with Iraq, did not air comments about war or terrorism, and at no point raised any questions about the recurrent violations of civil liberties or the changes in laws and policies since 9/11/01 and their impact on young people or communities of color.

106.1 KMEL effectively silenced the anti-war efforts of the entire hip-hop community by failing to promote the hundreds of peace efforts marking the anniversary of 9/11, the enormous political changes and impacts on the lives of everyday people, and the economic recession deepening the poverty of young people everywhere.



# WHAT WE WANT

## **WHAT KMEL CAN DO:**

### **Six Steps to Media Accountability at 106.1 KMEL**

- 1) **Promote the voices of local youth organizers.** KMEL should sponsor an on-air roundtable discussion on youth organizing co-hosted by "Street Soldiers" hosts and youth organizers from around the Bay, as well as a series of youth-produced radio spots about the issues impacting Bay Area youth and their families.
- 2) **Support Bay Area youth organizations.** KMEL should work with grassroots youth organizations like the Youth Media Council to increase the number of public service announcements about actions and events for peace and justice.
- 3) **Amplify the voices of local artists.** KMEL should agree to a series of meetings with local artists to hear and respond to their concerns about exclusion from the airwaves. KMEL should work with Mindzeye Collective and other groups representing local artists to increase the rotation!
- 4) **Build sustained relationships with local youth organizations and local artists.** KMEL should meet on a regular basis to establish methods to carry out the recommendations presented in this report.
- 5) **Create an advisory board.** KMEL should create a board that represents a range of opinions and can truly advocate for the issues and concerns of KMEL's audience, who are overwhelmingly young people of color.
- 6) **Increase accountability mechanisms.** KMEL should set up an accountability hotline where audience members can call and have their complaints and concerns recorded. KMEL should work with members of the Youth Media Council to implement this accountability mechanism.



#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KMEL HOSTS FROM THE YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL**

- Balance discussions about crime and violence with dialogue about economic conditions, education, and youth organizing
- Provide a policy context for problems raised in content
- Highlight root causes like racism and lack of access to services
- Let youth speak for themselves in shows about youth and youth policy
- Balance coverage of youth by giving airtime to youth organizers and advocates
- Examine solutions other than increased punishment, incarceration, and "better personal choices."
- Challenge the myth of rising youth crime and violence
- Link social problems to public policy solutions and examine the impact of ineffective policies that are hurting local communities

# CONCLUSION

**K**MEL has effectively silenced the social justice work and homegrown talent of “the people” it claims to represent. As young people of color and youth in general living in the Bay Area, we deserve access and accountability from local media outlets that profit from our vibrant youth culture. Bay Area youth and our families are tired of being scapegoated for the conditions in our communities. Local artists are tired of being invisible on the airwaves. We are tired of the stereotype of rising youth crime. We are tired of hearing that violence is the only thing worth talking about in our communities, and that we’re the ones to blame. We are tired of the deafening silence from KMEL when we gather in hundreds – often thousands – to demand peace and justice from one another and our government.

Corporations like Clear Channel and local stations like KMEL have a responsibility to represent and reflect their audience. KMEL says they want to know, “What’s Poppin’ in YOUR community.” Well, this is our answer. We’re being locked out and locked up. Youth and our parents are being blamed, while institutions, public policies, and social conditions that desperately need to be examined are never mentioned.

What’s poppin’? We need a radio station that truly represents the hip hop generation. We invite the hosts, announcers, and staff of KMEL to join Bay Area youth and communities to build a real people’s station.

# WHO WE ARE

*Report Team:* Malkia Cyril, Ying-Sun Ho, Nicole Lee, Jeff Perlstein, and Amy Sonnic

*KMEL Monitoring Team:* Saron Anglon, Justin Bojorquez, Olivia Ford, Samantha Hynes, Patricia Ong, Judy Talaugon, Tyger Walsh, Aryeetey Welbeck, and Youth Media Council staff

*Community Leaders:* Tony Coleman, Ameen, Plex, Jahi and Mindzeye, Emil Dupont, Rocio Nieves, and the KMEL monitoring team

*Thanks to* Aliza Dichter, Davey D, Seeta Peña Gangadharan, Janine Jackson, Taj James, Eva Paterson, Prometheus Radio Project, and We Interrupt This Message

*Cover Art by* Zack Johnson, Christine Wong, Oscar Araujo Jr., Antoine Lagarde, Min Lee, and Tiffany Sankary, courtesy of Mandela Arts Center

*Illustrations by* Yoly Stroeve

## THE YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL AND OUR PARTNERS

The “Building a People’s Station” media accountability campaign grew out of increasing community concern around KMEL’s content and commentary, lack of voices promoting social justice and community efforts, and inaccessibility to local artists. The Campaign’s lead partners include the Youth Media Council, a youth media coalition representing 12 Bay Area youth organizations, the youth organizing group Let’s Get Free, the media advocacy group Media Alliance, and local artists collective Mindzeye. Local hip-hop and spoken word artists, Bay Area high school students, community members, and journalists have joined the Campaign.

## LEAD PARTNER INFORMATION

### The Youth Media Council

Since April 2001, the Youth Media Council has been working with more than ten Bay Area youth organizations to build their media skills and capacity, strengthen the youth movement, and amplify the public voice of youth in debates that shape life and death issues for our communities. We believe that youth from marginalized communities need the tools, resources, strategies, and skills to become strong and effective media spokespeople and advocates for social justice.

### Let’s Get Free

Let’s Get Free is an organization of working class youth of color fighting to protect and defend their communities from unfair attacks by the criminal justice system. Combining organizing and hip hop culture, LGF is pioneering a new model for organizing and mobilizing urban youth. LGF is currently working with Books Not Bars and Youth Force Coalition on the Campaign to Stop the Superjail in Alameda County, and with People United for a Better Oakland on the recent fight against Measure FF on the Fall 2002 ballot. A project of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, LGF has worked for the last two years fighting for police accountability in Oakland, and in 2001, LGF helped lead the campaign against California’s Prop 21.

### Media Alliance

Founded by journalists in 1977, Media Alliance is a nationally-recognized media resource and advocacy center that fosters media in the interests of peace, justice, and social responsibility. The organization works to meet the media needs of community-based organizations, media workers, and the broader community.

# CONTACT US

To reach the Campaign coalition, contact the  
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For additional copies of this assessment, or copies of the Youth Media Council's *Media Accountability How-To Guide* (forthcoming), email:  
[info@youthmediacouncil.org](mailto:info@youthmediacouncil.org)

# REFERENCES

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## HIP HOP COMMENTARY

### AN OPEN LETTER TO THE BLACK COMMUNITY IT MAY BE TIME TO TURN OFF THE RADIO

**C**urrently, New York air waves that target the Black community, are filled with music and comments that express only negative, violent and denigrating ideas, creating a destructive emotional climate in the Black community. To understand our concern, it is absolutely necessary to understand the history and significance of music in Black culture. Our music has always been the most dominant manifestation of what we are and feel. The music has always been at the core of our experience in the world.

From **Selma** to **Sowetto**, the music has lifted us, inspired, informed, healed and encouraged us. In his essay, *Blue Print For Negro Writing*, the legendary Black writer, **Richard Wright** pointed out that Black writers of his era had turned to writing in an effort to prove to whites that there were Blacks who were civilized. And to this day the literature has all too often been the voice of talented, educated Blacks, lobbying whites for the acceptance of our race.

In that sense, the literature has been primarily directed to whites, in an effort to humanize Blacks. Our music, however, came from a different place, from **Mahalia Jackson** to **Marvin Gaye** from **John Coltrane** to **James Brown** It has always been a music profoundly directed to the psychic of Black people. Without apology, the music spoke directly to the hearts and minds of the people whose culture and experiences created it. It was our intellectual property The music urged us to **"Fight The Power"** it reminded us **"That There Ain't No Stopping Us Now"** it taught us to **"Try A Little Tenderness"** The music represented our collective consciousness, affirming our highest sense of possibilities pushing us beyond our contradictions to a more perfect self.

The music explained how we **"Could Have Sunshine On A Cloudy Day"** and proclaimed before the world **"That I'm Black And I'm Proud"** The music would not accept defeat. Curtis said **"Keep On Pushing"** & Stevie said **"Keep Reaching For Higher Ground"** and along the way we learned to celebrate our strengths and our unique genius, saying to those who would attempt to break our spirit, **"I Will Survive"** The key to where Black people must go has always been in the music.

Perhaps that is why the programming policy of radio and TV stations aimed at the Black community, refuse to play the more nourishing music of **KRS1, Nas, Common, The Manhattans, Ray Goodman & Brown, Roberta Flack, Jon Lucien**



Chuck D, Heather Headly, Blue Magic, Ollie Woodson and the many more, choosing instead to fill the air with ideas that are **anti-woman, anti-life**, and in a real sense, **anti-Black**. We are not asking them to stop playing anything. We will not engage in the censorship that they practice. We are urging **Power 105, Hot 97, WBLS, KISS, BET & MTV**, to simply include in their formats the new music from the many artists that continue to operate in the cultural tradition of Black art, producing music that reflects a fuller sense of Black contemporary reality, not just the thug reality constructed for us by people who hold Blacks in contempt.

The group **Dead Prez** helps us understand this when they point out that there is a body of music coming from hip hop and R&B artist "Fully dedicated and so real that radio won't play it." They further explain that "What's on the radio is propaganda and mind control" and they caution us that "Turning it on is like putting on a blindfold. Because when you bring it real, you don't get rotation, unless you take over the radio station." Dead Prez makes the point that we know how they use music to teach, and they warn us "Not to sleep because you could become a radio freak."

We fully support the Dead Prez contention that there comes a time when we should **TURN OFF THE RADIO !**

We are at a point where the community will literally have to demand respect. We are asking you to join us on selected days and **TURN OFF OFFENSIVE RADIO** as well as **Music TV**. We cannot allow only the worst ideas to freely infect our community and destroy our young. It is necessary to confront this assault on our spirit in the sharpest terms possible. **TURN OFF THE RADIO !** Let the advertisers know that there will be days when they are wasting their money. **TURN OFF THE RADIO !** Let radio owners know that ours is a community that they will respect. We insist!

### =====

## The Turn Off the Radio Rallys

**Tuesday, February 18, 2003 @ 7PM**

**Abyssinian Baptist Church** 138th Street, (Bet Adam Clayton Powell & Malcolm X Blvd.)

Info call (718) 398-1766

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## **HIP HOP AND THE POLITRIX OF RADIO**

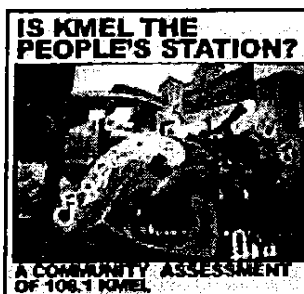
PAYOLA, CONSOLIDATION  
AND THE SAME 10 SONGS!

DID COMMERCIAL RADIO DESTROY HIP HOP?

Other articles on Hip Hop and Commercial Radio

## **URBAN RADIO RAGE** **HOW CLEAR CHANNEL WRECKED KMEL** BY JEFF CHANG

*When Clear Channel bought KMEL, it destroyed the so-called people's station. Now the people want it back.*



There aren't many visitors to **Clear Channel Communications Inc's** South of Market fortress these days, other than ad buyers, talent managers, and contest winners. The first floor looks like a tiny security bunker with silent music videos flickering on small wall-mounted TVs. So on **Jan. 6**, when a group of hip-hop activists showed up a bunch of teens and twentysomethings, battle-hardened, some of them anyway, by campaigns against globalization and **Proposition 21** the gatekeeper alerted management before allowing them up to the fourth-floor waiting room.

They were there for a meeting with representatives of **KMEL, 106.1 FM** In the skylighted penthouse conference room, **Malkia Cyril** executive director of **Youth Media Council** part of the listeners' group calling itself the **Community Coalition for Media Accountability (CCMA)**, pressed their case. Since Clear Channel took over KMEL in 1999, she said, there has been no access to the airwaves for social justice organizations, an imbalance in programming and content, and no avenues for community accountability.



KMEL representatives listened, sometimes confused, often baffled. Pop radio executives aren't used to going face-to-face with angry, politicized listeners. But then again, KMEL has never been an ordinary radio station. In recent years such meetings in which community leaders air grievances and radio execs scratch their heads seem to have become a regular thing. Once known as "the people's station," KMEL has become a target for the people's anger.

For more than 15 years, KMEL has been a national radio powerhouse. It is the number-two music station in the fourth-largest radio market in the country, commanding the largest radio audience among the highly coveted 18-to-34 demographic. But perhaps more important, KMEL holds an almost mythical place in Bay Area hip-hop. During the '90s, KMEL helped launch rappers like **Tupac Shakur**, **Hammer**, and **E-40**. It produced on-air personalities, including **Trace Dog** and **Franzen Wong** (of the **Up All Night Crew**) and **Renel Lewis** who seemed as around-the-way as hip-hop itself. Through its innovative community-affairs programming, it engaged the social issues of the hip-hop generation. The arrival in 1992 of a fierce competitor, **KYLD-FM**, also known as "**Wild**," which billed itself as "**the party station**" only reinforced KMEL's populist image.

But an unprecedented wave of consolidation swept the radio industry after Congress passed the **1996 Telecommunications Act** which removed station-ownership caps. Before the ink was dry, KMEL's then-parent company, **Evergreen Media** ended the ratings war with KYLD by purchasing it and the changes didn't stop there. A series of ever larger mergers culminated in 1999 with a whopping \$24 billion deal in which KMEL and KYLD passed from **AMFM Inc.** into the hands of Clear Channel. That, critics say, is when everything that was once so right began to go so wrong.

## An outcry for media justice

If the changes that began in 1996 began to turn off some longtime KMEL listeners, the Oct. 1, 2001, firing of radio personality and hip-hop activist **David "Davey D" Cook** shortly after his show **Street Knowledge** aired Rep. **Barbara Lee's** and the **Coup's Boots Riley's** objections to the war in Afghanistan was the final straw. Cook's firing seemed to symbolize the end of an era in which community input, local music, and progressive politics had a place at KMEL, and it triggered thousands of e-mails, faxes, and letters; rowdy picket lines at the station; and the current round of accountability meetings. Gang-peace organizer **Rudy Corpuz** of **United Playaz** said the message to KMEL remains clear: "Check your priorities. Without the community, your station would never have been made."

The KMEL protests are a big part of a swelling national backlash in urban communities against the shock jocks, autopilot programming, and mind-numbing hype of their radio stations. On **Jan. 14**, Cook joined with **Afrika Bambaataa** and the **Universal Zulu Nation** rapper **Chuck D**, **Bob Law** of the **National Leadership Alliance** and black activist organizations the **December 12th Movement** and the **Code Foundation** to denounce what they say is the lack of positive black music and community voices on stations like **Emmis Communications**-owned **Hot 97** and Clear Channel-owned **Power 105.1**. Many have begun calling it a movement for media justice.

Cook, who hosts the **Hard Knock Radio** and **Friday Night Vibes** shows on **KPFA**,

94.1 FM has now quietly and somewhat reluctantly become one of the movement's most prominent spokespeople. Speaking to the **Bay Guardian** from New York, he sketched out the issues. "The main complaint I've heard for three days," he explained, "is the lack of positive music, lack of access, and just the feeling that there's something foul about what I am listening to. People are really pissed from coast to coast."

## Radio Godzilla

Clear Channel's vast media empire caught the public's attention during the aftermath of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when executives allegedly circulated a list of so-called sensitive songs to be banned from the airwaves. By then corporate media critics were already describing **Clear Channel** as the Godzilla of the radio industry. Indeed, no other firm has benefited more from the **Telecommunications Act**. It has gone from owning 40 stations in 1996 to owning 1,240 today, commanding over a quarter of all radio revenues and listeners. (In the Bay Area it holds a similar market share.) Its closest competitor, **Cumulus Media** owns just 248 stations. "Clear Channel is the monster that destroyed radio," veteran Bay Area radio-industry watcher and columnist **Bill Mann** said.

Critics say Clear Channel's **KMEL** has been distinguished by bland on-air personalities, reactionary politics, and the same seven songs that seem to be playing on every urban station everywhere. Bay Area political rapper Paris notes that in 1990, KMEL helped artists like him and **Digital Underground** blow up nationally. During the Gulf War the station even aired a remix of a **Sway and Tech** track called "**Time for Peace**" that featured all of them. "There was a lot more willingness to support local talent. Now that willingness is not there," he said. "Especially in this political climate, even in what many would argue is the cradle of liberalism, there's no room for anything that's progressive. Everything is rampant negativity."



Wong thinks the station is a shell of its former self. "They don't care about the streets anymore," he said.

## Radio for everyone

The calls for change at KMEL are coming from a powerful source: angry youths of color from the station's target audience. Last fall a group of listeners began subjecting KMEL to some hard listening. The result was a scathing critique of the station issued by the Youth Media Council and the CCMA ([www.media-alliance.org/action/KMEL.pdf](http://www.media-alliance.org/action/KMEL.pdf)). The CCMA's broad front includes the **Mindzeye Artist Collective**, hip-hop activist organization **Let's Get Free** and global justice group **Just Act**.

They argue that since Cook was fired, progressives have lost their voice. They charge that the last remaining community-affairs program, Street Soldiers, excludes their views. They note that local artists who make up one of the most vibrant and diverse rap music scenes in the country are rarely heard on the station. The title of their report pointedly asks the question "**Is KMEL the**

## People's Station?

"They say that they're the people's station," said **Just Act** program coordinator and CCMA spokesperson **Saron Anglon** a 25-year-old who has listened to KMEL for 15 years. "They're not talking about social change or peace. They're focusing on things like crime and war. Our communities are listening to this quote-unquote people's station, and the people are not necessarily being represented."

A recent study by the **Future of Music Coalition** ([www.futureofmusic.org](http://www.futureofmusic.org)) an artists' rights-public interest organization, provides a context for urban radio rage. Radio deregulation, the report argues, has left the public airwaves dominated by companies that have laid off hundreds, decimated community programming, and all but standardized playlists across the country. The report also found that an overwhelming majority of listeners want playlists with more variety and more local artists. It cites research pointing out that the time an average listener spends with the radio has dropped to a 27-year low.

On Jan. 6 the newest FCC commissioner, **Jonathan Adelstein** spoke to attendees at a **Future of Music Coalition** conference in Washington, D.C. He echoed the concerns of media justice activists across the country, said, "We must ask ourselves: At what point does consolidation come at the cost of the local expression that makes radio so unique and so special in this country? At what point does allowing consolidation undermine the public interest and the quality of what we hear on the radio?"

For a growing number of alienated urban radio listeners, the answer is "Now."

## Building the people's station

During the early '80s, Bay Area urban radio was stagnating, dominated by slick, disposable R&B. At the same time, college- and community-radio stations like **KPOO-FM**, **KZSU-FM**, **KUSF-FM**, and **KALX-FM** were championing hip-hop. **Danyel Smith**, the author of **More like Wrestling** and a former **Vibe** magazine editor in chief, was a columnist for the **Bay Guardian** during the years hip-hop broke.

"You had to know where **Billy Jam** was gonna be playing, where **Davey D** was gonna be playing," she said. "To the rest of the world, they were very little radio stations that came in staticky, and the show was on in the middle of the night, but you were in the know, and things were really exciting. And as much as I think we all liked being part of our little secret thing, we all thought, 'Wow this music needs to be heard by everyone. Someone needs to take it and blow it up, give it the respect that it deserves.' And for the Bay Area, that station was KMEL."

During the mid '80s, KMEL changed from a rock format to a "contemporary hits" format and became one of the first crossover pop stations in the nation to target young multiracial audiences with hip-hop, house, and reggae music. To make it work, KMEL desperately needed street credibility. College- and community-radio jocks, such as **KALX's** Cook, **Sadiki Nia** and **Tamu du Ewa** and local artists, including (now-MTV personality) **Sway** and **King Tech** were recruited to the station. "They took what we were doing at community radio and

brought it to the station," said KPOO personality **KK Baby**, who joined KMEL in 1991. "They would use us to attract the rest of the pop music audience."

Most of the jocks were never offered full-time positions, but they brought their audiences with them and became the central force in pushing KMEL to play cutting-edge music and offer community-oriented programming. **Street Soldiers** evolved from Hammer's idea to have a forum for young people to talk candidly about issues like gang violence. (The syndicated show is now hosted by **Joe Marshall** and **Margaret Norris** of the **Omega Boys Club**) Davey D's hugely influential **Street Knowledge** program debuted in 1995 as a talk show for the hip-hop generation, dealing with topics spanning race, gender, and class. On his second show Davey D hosted a roundtable on the state of civil rights that featured **Jesse Jackson** then-assembly speaker **Willie Brown** **Chuck D**, **Paris**, and **Belva Davis**

With a formula of underground-friendly playlists, activism-savvy programming, and street promotions, the station's ratings soared in the early '90s. **KMEL's** approach progressive, edgy, multicultural, inclusive fit the Bay Area well. Listeners embraced the people's station with open arms. **KMEL's** music shows and community-affairs programming, even its popular Summer Jam events, were soon imitated throughout the country.

The 1992 ratings war with **KYLD** brought out the best in most people. **Michael Martin**, who was then **KYLD's** program director and now serves as **Clear Channel's** regional vice president of programming, said, "We felt **KMEL** was a little lazy, so we came in with a vengeance." It was in this fierce competition that mainstays like **Sway** and **Tech's Wake-Up Show**, **Street Soldiers**, **Street Knowledge**, and **KYLD's Doghouse** stepped forward. At the same time, the dueling stations let the mix-show DJs experiment with local music, resulting in hits for artists like **Tha Click**, **Conscious Daughters**, **Mac Mall**, and the **Luniz**. The audience expanded to include listeners from San Jose to Pittsburgh.

## All around the world, the same song

Then the Telecommunications Act was passed. FCC chair **Reed Hundt** defended the legislation by arguing, "We are fostering innovation and competition in radio." But by all accounts, **KMEL's** innovative years were over. After a dustup between **Too \$hort** and the **Luniz** at the 1995 Summer Jam, local artists were reportedly pushed off playlists. Mix-show DJs increasingly found their mixes subject to approval by higher-ups. Specialty shows were quietly eliminated. The battle for young urban ears ended with **KMEL's** purchase of **KYLD**. Three years later, **Clear Channel** swallowed them both.

To the listener, consolidation is probably most apparent in what the stations play. Just listen to **KMEL's** and **KYLD's** nightly countdowns of the seven "most requested" (their own words) songs. On any given night the stations may share as many as four of their seven "most requested" songs the same **50 Cent**, **Ashanti** and **Ja Rule**, **LL Cool J**, and **P. Diddy** tracks that are playing across the country. The exception, "**Closer**," by the Bay Area's **Goapele**, which was added to **KMEL's** rotation last month, stands out like a diamond for its rarity.

"Programming is more or less centralized," columnist Mann argued. "This is not guesswork. They've got too much money and too many shareholders at stake to

leave much to chance." But Martin, who programs **KMEL**, **KYLD**, and **K101-FM** while overseeing the playlists of all of the other Clear Channel stations in northern California, denies this. "There is no centralization of programming at Clear Channel," he said. "There is no such thing as a national type of playlist."



Still, this is small consolation for local artists like **E-A-Ski**, who, despite producing records for **Master P** and **Ice Cube** that have sold millions of copies and holding a national fan base for his own rap records, still finds himself knocking from the outside. After Clear Channel took over, he and other local artists went to **KMEL** to protest their exclusion. As a result, **Davey D** got the green light to begin broadcasting the short-lived **Local Flavaz** show. These days **E-A-Ski** is one of a tiny number of local artists heard on **KMEL**, but only because he is on a remix of Atlanta rapper **Lil' Jon's** "**Who U Wit**." "If you look at the South, they got all their DJs and their radio to support their records. The same system they have, we had," he said. "Everybody else is supporting their music, but **KMEL** isn't doing it."

Martin dismissed such complaints, saying, "No matter what market you go into, you hear the same complaint from the same people: you don't support local artists, you don't play this. Bottom line is, if they would put out hit records that are equal in hit quality to the other stuff we're playing on the air, there wouldn't be an issue."

He does concede that playlists have tightened over the years. "I will tell you that, around the country, the stations that play less have bigger ratings. **Power 106** in L.A., who has huge ratings, their most-spun record in a day can go up to 16 times in a day. My most-played will hit 11, maybe 12, that's it," he said. "Because, at the end of the day, the hits are the hits. And the audience comes to you for a reason to hear the hits."

"The listeners don't care who owns us, or whether or not [stations] are owned by the same company, or the same person is programming them," he added.

## Who stole the soul?

Martin's canny management took **KYLD** from "worst to first," as he puts it. But as **KYLD** caught up to **KMEL** in ratings and revenue during the late '90s, the people's station suffered a slow death. "There were four different mergers. People were cut all along. People were just getting frustrated, and then when Clear Channel came in, that was the worst [part] of it all," onetime **KMEL** DJ **Nia** said.

Shortly before she was laid off, **Nia's** cohost, **du Ewa**, who also engineered the overnight shows, was shown her own obsolescence when she was trained on the programming system created by Clear Channel subsidiary **Prophet Systems Innovation**. "The [software] has the music, commercials, and in-house station-promotions elements. I could look on there and find **Wild's** and [**KISS-FM's**] programming as well," she said. "Their idea was to cut late-night shifts, cut as many people as they can, and have more voice-overs. The late shift I used to do



from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. on the weekends is now digitally preprogrammed."

For the listener, this process, known as "**voice tracking**" crushes the notion that all radio is local. Jocks may prerecord vocal drops and listener calls to send out to other Clear Channel stations throughout the region. Labor unions argue that Clear Channel utilizes voice tracking to violate labor contracts, according to **Peter Fuster**, vice president of the **American Federation of Radio and Television Artists** New York chapter. Consumer groups say it undercuts radio's public mission to provide news, information, and color for local communities. The practice is so controversial that it has already provoked a **National Labor Relations Board** charge against KMEL's New York counterpart, **Power 105**, which imported former KMEL DJ **Theo Mizuhara's** voice for overnight programming.

Mann said, "For years I've been calling them **Cheap Channel** because they consolidate and they lay people off." Other industry insiders speculate that Clear Channel is in a bind because it overpaid for its radio properties.

Many former KMEL employees say it was Martin who presided over Clear Channel's gutting of KMEL. During the summer of 2000, he replaced the station's fired program director, Joey Arbagey, and was handed programming responsibilities for both stations. "All these years you're competing with him, now he's your boss," du Ewa said. "He was on this personal vendetta to prove that he could make that place totally successful with his people. And eventually that's who he had in there, a whole new staff of his people."

Despite being among the highest-rated radio personalities in the Bay Area, the **Up All Night Crew's** Wong was dismissed. He had started at KMEL as a 14-year-old intern and worked his way up to become one of the station's key assets. He was cohost of a popular video show on the California Music Channel, one of the most visible Asian American radio DJs in the country, a big supporter of local artists, and a bona fide Bay Area street hero. "My contract was up January 1, 2001. I had the meeting with [Martin] on January 2, 2001, and that's when I got let go," Wong, now a radio personality in Las Vegas, said. "I told him, 'Thank you,' and I walked out. The thing that burned me the most is that I didn't get to say good-bye to my listeners." (Martin says Wong was fired "due to insubordination" and will not comment further.)

On Oct. 1, Davey D was fired. He recalls his last few weeks at the station as being surreal: "I remember after 9/11, I got a call, and they wondered where the candlelight vigil was for the night. I said, 'The candlelight vigil?' And it was like, 'Yeah, we need to send the street team there.' That's typical of radio these days."

### **'Why support them?'**

Execs at Clear Channel note that its stations' ratings are higher than ever. In the just-concluded books for fall 2001, KMEL rose to a 4.3 share, which they say represents an audience of nearly 692,000 listeners, up from 562,000 when Davey D was fired. "When you start to see ratings slip, you need to make changes, and the changes that we have made have made KMEL a higher-ranked, higher-rated radio station," Martin said.

But Davey D argues that the numbers don't measure whether people are satisfied or simply have nowhere else to go. "You may have more listeners than you ever had before, but you also have more complaints than they ever had before. You have people dissatisfied in a way they never were before. You have people meeting, doing demonstrations, writing letters, doing monitoring and hearings and all this stuff that never happened before."

**Thembisa Mshaka** former rap editor for the **Gavin Report** trade magazine and now a Columbia Records executive and **Emixshow** magazine columnist, argues that companies like Clear Channel no longer care about "stationality" an industry term for how well a station distinguishes itself by its personality, as reflected in the styles of the DJs and the presentation of local music and news. With the growth of alternative radio outlets, via satellite and Internet, addressing community complaints may represent Clear Channel's last, best chance to keep Bay Area listeners interested. "There are still as many listeners out there to keep these stations going, but they've gotta be concerned about their future. They're kidding themselves if they're not," Mshaka said.

KMEL has allowed the past half decade of successful local R&B and hip-hop acts to pass it by, including important artists like **Meshell Ndegeocello** and **the Coup**. "They're excluding themselves from the musical renaissance happening in the Bay Area," **KPOO's KK Baby** said. And since Street Knowledge ended with Davey D's firing, no current programming reflects the brilliant voices of the burgeoning local hip-hop-activist movement, which has been instrumental in setting the national agenda for post-boomer progressives.

Recently, Clear Channel execs have made some concessions. Since the release of the CCMA's report in November, they have added a battle-of-the-rappers segment and a Friday-night local artist mix show hosted by Big Von and have brought back the Wake-Up Show. They've also agreed to open an ongoing dialogue with the CCMA. In fact, execs and activists left the Jan. 6 meeting optimistic that they could work together.

But others are skeptical. "Now people in the streets are talking," rapper E-A-Ski said. "I've had cats that just really want to say, 'If they ain't gon' support us, then why are we supporting them? Don't let them come out to the streets and the clubs.' "

Yet he continues to work with the station. "Big Von said to me yesterday we got a lot more work to do. So I take that as we're moving towards trying to make a new era in Bay Area rap, and I'ma hold cats to that. But when I don't see it, I'll be the first one to make a record letting them know."

But will it get played? He paused to consider the irony. "What am I supposed to do? Sit around here and just keep begging motherfuckers? I'm not gon' keep begging."

-end-

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